

Geographical Perspectives on the Study of *Shugendo*, A Japanese Mountain Religion

Masayasu Oda*

Shugendo is a Japanese mountain religion which has a long history and more significant geographical contents than non-itinerant religions. This article outlines the historical development of *Shugendo*, and presents geographical perspectives on it.

Shugendo is characterized by its emphasis on ascetic practices undertaken in the mountains in order for the aspirant to obtain supernatural powers. It was formed by mixing native mountain worship (an element of Shintoism), Buddhism and Taoism around the 8th century. The organization of *Shugendo* had two major sects, namely the Honzan Sect and the Tozan Sect, until the 19th century. In the Edo period (17th to 19th century), mountain pilgrimage became popular among common people, too. In 1872 *Shugendo* was legally abolished by the government. However, since 1945 the religious activities have been given freer rein, and many *Shugendo*-connected societies are active again.

The author focuses on *Shugendo*'s setting (landscape), thought (recognition), ritual (behavior), and organization from the geographical, especially spatial viewpoint. Mountains are the setting of *Shugendo*'s asceticism which involves many sacred places and has a geographical scale. *Shugendo* ascetics or common people have some recognition or imagery of these sacred mountains. Ascetic practices in the mountains can be regarded as spatial behavior. Management of the setting is concerned with organizations of *Shugendo*.

As these four dimensions are closely connected with each other, their interrelationship also becomes a focus of the investigation. Further, it is necessary to compare many sacred mountains with each other to elucidate regional characters. Moreover, it is important to observe their historical transformation. The "geography of *Shugendo*" as mentioned above concerns itself with the geographical study of pilgrimage and mountaineering, too.

Introduction

Japan is generally regarded as a nation of Buddhism and Shintoism. Indeed, we can see many temples and shrines belonging to these two religions all over the country. There is, however, another religious tradition of *Shugendo* which has a long history in Japan. Though *Shugendo* has a smaller number of adherents and its adherents have decreased in number compared with its heyday, it is calculated that a tenth of the Japanese population is concerned with the religion even now (Miyake 1986, 505-508).

Geography of religion can deal with various religions in the world, among which *Shugendo* has most significant content, in that it is closely con-

nected with the earth surface on a geographical scale. The main object of this article is to present geographical perspectives on the study of *Shugendo*. As the religion seems to be hardly known even among some Japanese people, first of all this essay attempts to answer the question, "What is *Shugendo*?" before going on to the main subject.¹

I. What Is *Shugendo* ?²

In a word *Shugendo* is a Japanese mountain religion. It resembles Buddhism in that the doctrine and ritual are mainly drawn from esoteric Buddhism, but it is characterized by its emphasis on ascetic practices undertaken in the mountains in order for the aspirant to obtain supernatural powers. The word "*Shugendo* 修験道" itself lit-

* Department of Geography at Komazawa University, Tokyo.

erally means the way (道=*do*) of mastering (修=*shu*) supernatural powers (験=*gen*), while the common term for a *Shugendo* practitioner is “*yamabushi* 山伏”, or more formally *Shugenja* 修験者, which implies one who retreats or lies down (伏=*bushi*, a corruption of *fushi*) in the mountains (山=*yama*).

1. The Formation of *Shugendo*

Shugendo has a long history. The words of “*Shugen*” and “*yamabushi*” appeared as early as the 9th century; various circumstances leading up to its formation may be summed up as follows.

One of its origins is the native mountain worship which is also an element of Shintoism. In Japan people have worshipped mountains since ancient times. Mountains are considered to be realms where souls of ancestors reside or gods of water for paddy fields live. It is this idea that forms the basis of the mountain religion.

Other origins of *Shugendo* occurred with the introductions of Buddhism and Taoism. Buddhism was first introduced into the country in the 6th century, and later in the early 9th century two esoteric sects (the Shingon Sect and the Tendai Sect) entered Japan from China via Korea. Esoteric Buddhists built many temples in the mountains to apply themselves to ascetic practices, and escape from the secular world. *Shugendo* has been affected by this esoteric Buddhism in various ways. Meanwhile, some of the influences of Taoism, too, can be seen in the *Shugendo* ideas, though details of its introduction are not yet clearly known.

Shugendo was formed by mixing religious elements as mentioned above. Some documents about mountain ascetics from the 8th century are still extant. It would be convenient if we could attribute *Shugendo*'s inception to a founder for the sake of historical documentation. However, *Shugendo* has no definite founder as in the case of Christianity and Buddhism; instead mountain ascetics appeared separately, though it is commonly believed that En-no-ozunu (often called En-no-gyoja more informally) had set it up, and he has accordingly been made an object of worship. En-no-ozunu demonstrated supernatural powers in the late 7th and early 8th centuries, but there are no historical documents which treat him specifically.

2. The Organizations of *Shugendo*

It is after the late 11th century when separate *yamabushi* came to be partly organized into the

formal religious societies permitted by the central government, though at the same time local groups seem to have been organized on each respective mountain. These organizations of *yamabushi*, or *Shugendo* had two major sects, namely the Honzan Sect (*Honzan-ha*) and the Tozan Sect (*Tozan-ha*), until the 19th century. The Honzan Sect had a close relationship to the Tendai Sect of esoteric Buddhism, and the Tozan Sect to the Shingon Sect. The headquarters of the former sect was the Shogo-in Temple, and the latter one was at the Sambo-in Temple, although it is not until the 17th century that the Sambo-in Temple assumed this role. Both of them were situated in Kyoto, the Emperor's Capital till the 19th century, and supervised *yamabushi* in the whole country in the Edo period (17th to 19th century). Historically the Honzan Sect seems to have come into existence earlier.

An often mentioned event concerning the formation of the Honzan Sect is that in 1090 Zoyo, a *yamabushi* as well as a priest of the Tendai Sect, served as the pilgrim guide for the Retired Emperor Shirakawa to Kumano, a central place of *Shugendo*, and was appointed as the first Kumano head priest. He was also given the Shogo-in Temple in Kyoto. The chief priest of the Shogo-in Temple did not always hold the post of the Kumano head priest concurrently in the 12th and 13th centuries, but since the 14th century the same figure came to be in charge of both. The Temple endeavored to pull under its control local *yamabushi* related to Kumano, by guaranteeing them the right of serving as Kumano pilgrim guides. In this way the Shogo-in Temple obtained the position of the head of the Honzan Sect.

On the other hand, the Tozan Sect has insisted that it was founded by Shobo, a *yamabushi* as well as a priest of the Shingon Sect, of the late 9th and early 10th centuries, but there is no proof of that. Historical documents say that in the 16th century there was a group of over 30 principal *yamabushi* related to the Shingon Sect. They were from the Kinki district, especially Yamato Province (Nara Prefecture at present), and had *yamabushi* of the region under their control. In the early 17th century this group had a dispute with the Honzan Sect, and asked the Sambo-in Temple for help. That is how the Temple became the headquarters of the Tozan Sect.

3. Ascetic Practices and Ideas of *Yamabushi*

At first, *yamabushi* seem to have practiced asceticism in solitude. One by one, they would

retreat into the mountains, especially caves, where they would spend days together praying or reading scriptures; at other times they would make short pilgrimages to local sites sacred to *Shugendo*. However, as the organizations were formed, the methods of mountain asceticism and their doctrinal implications were gradually unified.

In the famous case of the Ohmine Mountains, which run from Yoshino (in Nara Prefecture) to above-mentioned Kumano (in Wakayama Prefecture), the mountain ascetics were expected to walk along the ridge of the mountains. Within a choice of only one of two directions, it has traditionally been said that the Honzan ascetics walked from Kumano to Yoshino (called "*jumbu*" in Japanese, which means the traditional course), while the Tozan ascetics walked from Yoshino to Kumano (called "*gyakudu*", which means the non-traditional course, or climbing from the other end of the mountain range). However, in fact, most of the Honzan ascetics also started from Yoshino especially in the Edo period. Historical records of the 15th century claim that the course took 75 days, but this is because there were a couple of spots where *yamabushi* stopped for one or two weeks to practice austerities. Their training seems to have involved reciting sutras, collecting water and wood, making confessions to the leader, undergoing fasts, hanging from a rope head first over a precipice, and so on. Through this physical and spiritual training, they believed they were enabled to acquire supernatural powers which involved exorcising evil spirits, curing illness, making prophecies, and performing other supernatural feats.

Keeping pace with the formulation of the way of asceticism, the doctrine of *Shugendo* was formed in the Muromachi period (14th to 16th century), mainly drawing on esoteric Buddhism. Perhaps the most interesting aspect to us geographers is *Shugendo*'s regard of mountains as a *mandara* (in Sanskrit *mandala*), a picture containing many Buddhist gods' icons. In other words, the mountains are considered as gods. Probably it is for this reason that some Japanese mountains have names of Buddhist gods. For example, "Dainichi-dake" means "the peak of *Dainichi-nyorai* (Buddha of Infinite Light)." In the setting like this *yamabushi* practiced asceticism and attempted to merge into one of the many Buddhist gods so that they could obtain supernatural powers.

4. The Popularization of the Mountain Pilgrimage

The Edo period is characterized by the popularization of the mountain pilgrimage as well as the organization and settlement of *yamabushi* imposed by the Tokugawa Shogunate and the formalization of ascetic practices.

Those who practiced asceticism of *Shugendo* were essentially limited to specialists, referred to as *yamabushi*. Their austerities, though gradually made simpler and formalized, continued until the end of the Edo period. In the meanwhile, as the political world stabilized in Japan and common people could travel more easily during the Edo period, religious pilgrimage in groups (called *ko*) became more popular, sometimes taking sacred mountains of *Shugendo* as their destinations. Pilgrims periodically climbed the mountains, guided by *yamabushi* who were permanently settled at their foot. Unlike *yamabushi* the pilgrims usually only went to the top and back down without staying for a long time in the mountain, and the procedure for performing the ritual on the way was not so complicated, although it sometimes required considerable physical endurance just as it had traditionally been practiced by original *yamabushi*.

Yamabushi on the respective mountains, besides being the guides, offered lodging to pilgrims, and in the off-season they traveled around the areas from which pilgrims came, to distribute gods' talismans and to encourage them to make a pilgrimage again. It is because *yamabushi* greatly depended on incomes from pilgrims that they were eager to promote their invitations.

Mountain pilgrimages like these were found almost all over the country, some of which are still continued.

5. *Shugendo* after the 19th Century

The Meiji government, which replaced the Tokugawa Shogunate in 1867, carried out a new religious policy. Till that time Shintoism and Buddhism had been believed to exist syncretically. The government, attaching greater importance to Shintoism, tried to separate them and to oppress Buddhism. Because *Shugendo* had components of both Shintoism and Buddhism, it was regarded as ambiguous in nature. It was thought that *Shugendo*'s magical rites confused the mind of the common people. Thus, in 1872 it was legally abolished by the government.

The temples of *Shugendo* were pressed to con-

vert to Shintoism or Buddhism. For example, the Shogo-in Temple, which had been the headquarters of the Honzan Sect, came to belong to the Tendai Sect of esoteric Buddhism, while the Sambo-in Temple of the Tozan Sect to the Shingon Sect of Buddhism. The *yamabushi* were obliged to become priests of other religions, otherwise they assumed more secular positions such as farmers. The tradition of *Shugendo* was maintained quietly within esoteric Buddhism, supported by a few former *yamabushi*. Ascetic practices were mostly discontinued, and paths and training spots in the sacred mountains fell into ruin. As for the practice of mountain pilgrimages, although to some extent they were affected by the national abolishment of *Shugendo*, quite a few pilgrimages continue to be made even now. Pilgrimages closer to folk religions or ones which took the form of "Sect Shintoism" (different from "State Shintoism") seems to have survived, though the former type of pilgrimages have gradually declined with the modernization of Japanese society.

Since 1945, and the end of the World War II, the religious activities have been given freer rein, and many *Shugendo* or *Shugendo*-connected societies have become independent, although some, such as the sect gathering around the Sambo-in Temple, have stayed within the existing religions as before. There is no organization that unifies *Shugendo*-connected societies as in the Edo period, but they are active separately. Even now mountains occupy an important position in these sects, and some attempts can be seen to reconstruct mountain asceticism.

II. Geographical Perspectives on the Study of *Shugendo*

Generally speaking, religion is composed of the following aspects: thought, ritual, setting and organization.³ Human beings have religious ideas and perform religious acts in religious settings. People who have the same religion tend to form a religious group. Each element has its own spatial dimensions as well as historical ones. From the geographical viewpoint, therefore, we can approach spatial aspects of thought, ritual, setting and organization of religions. This approach may also be applied quite naturally to the subject matter of this article, *Shugendo*.

In the case of *Shugendo*, it is important to recognize that the setting of mountains has a geographical scale much larger than architectural

space such as temples or shrines. Then, geographical perspectives on *Shugendo* center around the setting which may be called "landscape" in a geographical sense.⁴

1. Setting (Landscape)

Mountains are the setting of *yamabushi* ascetic practices including mountain pilgrimage. Corresponding to their training, there exist various sacred places and paths which connect them. In other words, the places existed first, and later *yamabushi* located the places suited to their training such as peaks, strangely shaped rocks, caves, hollows, waterfalls, pools and so on that have consequently become sacred places. In addition, artificial facilities have sometimes been made there, such as huts and small temples.

Orthodox geographers will initially be interested in locating the places and paths on the map. When the asceticism under study had been discontinued or its practice is relocated to other places, researchers have to reconstruct past routes and to identify the place names of old documents with the actual landscape. There were and remain few artifacts in contrast to the reconstruction of, for example, settlement forms. Therefore studies focus on identification and description of the sacred places. However, the restoration and mapping of artifacts is likewise an important subject. Through these studies, the outward appearance of the setting is made clear, though it may not be understood by geomorphological description alone.⁵

Turning our attention to the periphery of the setting, namely, the foot of the sacred mountain, there were frequently settlements of *yamabushi*, some of which have continued with changed form and function. These settlements themselves have been dealt with from a standpoint of settlement geography. However, they can be observed also within the geographical study of *Shugendo* itself.⁶

The location of the sacred mountain is a geographical problem, too. Fig. 1 shows the distribution of principal sacred mountains where forms of asceticism, including pilgrimage, were practiced. They are distributed almost all over the country except for Hokkaido. There are some disputable points on such a map, which will be reserved for future discussion.

2. Thought (Recognition)

Shugendo's doctrine about mountains is spatial as mentioned above. Though it is not so precisely composed as the diverse real earth surface, the

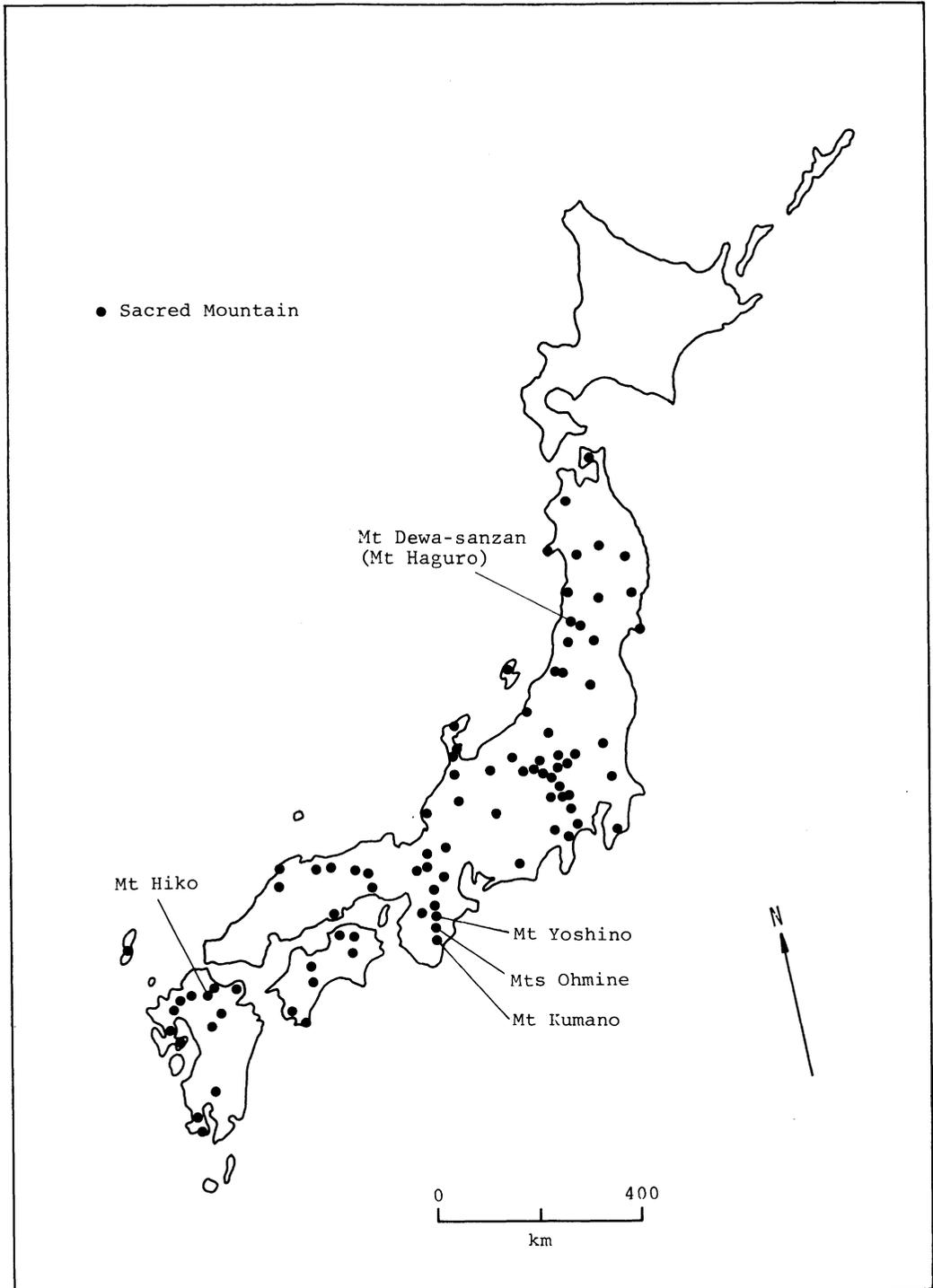


Figure 1. Distribution of Sacred Mountains in Japan.
Source: Adapted from Nagano (1987, 2).

world view or the mountain view is worthy of observation. According to the normal mountain *mandara* (cf. I-3) view, it regards the world as composed of a pair of *mandara*, *taizo-kai* (in Sanskrit *garbha-dhatu*, womb) and *kongo-kai* (*vajra-dhatu*, diamond). To be concrete, one mountain is given the meaning of *taizo-kai*, and another is given *kongo-kai* as the pair, or a mountain range is divided into these two parts. In some cases the view allots a specific spot to the center of the *mandara* or the dividing point between the two.

It is recognition or imagery of respective sacred mountains that is more interesting than general doctrinal aspects as above. The easiest to understand is to put together a specific number of sacred places' names. For example, the number of 75 or 48, which in itself has some significance, is chosen as the total number.⁷ And many sacred places have their religious traditions that, for example, this (Hakkyo-ga-dake Mountain) is the place where the founder En-no-ozunu buried eight scriptures. By observing areal differences of these traditions at every spot, it becomes possible to investigate the structure of the respective sacred mountains.⁸

Lately religious paintings regarding pilgrimage to the sacred areas have attracted attention as research documents of some disciplines including geography. They can naturally be utilized to elucidate the recognition of sacred mountains (e.g., Iwahana 1985).

Problems of imagery are concerned with the subjects of the recognition, namely, who recognizes? If sacred mountains were known only to *yamabushi*, the layman would not come into consideration. However, lay people have had some contact with *yamabushi*, are aware of their activity and have made pilgrimages themselves to sacred mountains, though their knowledge is rough and limited. In this way, the imagery of sacred mountains through laymen's eyes is also a matter deserving inquiry.

3. Ritual (Behavior)

Ritual of *Shugendo* contains many kinds of rites such as exorcising evil spirits and fortune-telling, among which ascetic practices in the setting of mountains is a principal and indispensable method for acquiring such supernatural power.

Mountain asceticism including pilgrimage⁹ is a spatial behavior from the geographical viewpoint. In other words, the behavioral pattern of *yamabushi* and pilgrims within the sacred mountain

should be grasped firstly. Specifically, it is concerned with such matters as where they travel and stay, what kind of rites they conduct at each place, what time in the year asceticism is practiced, and how many people train themselves. However, since the training has almost entirely been discontinued now, efforts must be made to identify the former way of practice (e.g., Nagano 1986, 148-174).

Further, attention must be paid to the implication that each rite has. For ritual behavior in the mountain is a series of various rites respectively having some meaning like entering and leaving sacred areas. Taking this into account, analysis of these rites can be a key to clarifying the structure of the sacred mountain.

In addition to these religious aspects, practical ways of asceticism such as financial arrangement and meals are not negligible matters. Mountain asceticism cannot be practiced by unaccompanied *yamabushi* alone. It calls for someone's help in managing lodging, meals and carrying luggage. Who takes care of *yamabushi* and pilgrims? To whom do they make payment for that service? These questions come to be related to the management of the sacred mountain which will be mentioned in the next section.

The round trip between residential areas and the destination in mountain pilgrimage can also be a focus of the study. As in the case of asceticism in the mountains, pilgrim routes, its practices, etc. should be observed with special reference to spatial aspects (e.g., Iwahana 1987).

4. Organization

When we think of the management of the setting, it is necessary to take some organizations into consideration. For instance, who owns the land? Who makes and repairs paths and facilities there? These questions relate to *yamabushi* groups and to inhabitants at the foot of the mountain. When more than one sect or village is involved in one area and each territory is spatially divided, this subject becomes of more geographical concern. Taking the case of the Ohmine Mountains, the Honzan Sect was in charge of the northern half, while the southern was administered by the Tozan Sect. In addition to the management of the setting, difference of thought and ritual among sects is also worthy of investigation, especially when the difference appears spatially. It is one example that the routes of the mountaineering differ between the Honzan and the Tozan.

The above description from setting to organization has centered around the setting of mountains which is peculiar to *Shugendo*, meanwhile the theme of organization in this section can be dealt with also in common ways with other religions. A nationwide society of *Shugendo* like the Honzan Sect has a hierarchical system, as is often the case with religious organizations. That is to say, it is composed of headquarters, executive temples, leading temples in the district, local *yamabushi* and so on. Its spatial structure and evolutionary process is likewise a geographical subject. If the observation extends to the comparison with the basic regional structure, the "geography of *Shugendo*" will attract our colleagues of other specialities.

In the meantime, each sacred mountain has one or more than one small-scale society. These societies are often an aggregate of mountain pilgrims including resident *yamabushi*. By examining from which district pilgrims come, a sphere of religion or a sphere of influence of the sacred mountain can be made clear. There have already been some discussions about the concentric circles' structure of the religious sphere (e.g., Iwahana 1983b).

5. Integration of the Respective Perspectives

This article has taken up four perspectives on the geographical study of *Shugendo* and outlined some possible directions of investigation so far. These four dimensions are closely connected with each other, although the above description has treated them separately. That is, the interrelationship of the four dimensions also becomes a focus of the examination. For example, what kind of relations do the formation of one image about the sacred mountain have with landscape and behavior (Oda 1989)? Does the recognized structure correspond to the behavioral one?

Further, it should be noted that the above has mainly presupposed the case in which one sacred mountain is the study field. In other words, by comparing many sacred mountains with each other, common and different points are noticed. This matter leads us to the theme of regional character and spatial diffusion.

Moreover, it is important that all the above are historically transformed. That is, formation or process of change come into our sights in respective dimensions, respective mountains and their interrelationship. Observed in this way, the "geography of *Shugendo*" is a topic full of rich content.

III. Concluding Remarks

This paper has regarded geographical perspectives as spatial ones, and focused on spatial studies of *Shugendo*. Our discipline, however, has regional and environmental viewpoints as well. In other words, the religion can be dealt with geographically in relation to region and environment, too. Then, for example, the following questions immediately arise. What kind of roles has *Shugendo* played in the rural communities? Or does the mountain religion have any connections with the preservation of nature (Nagano 1989a; 1990)?

Furthermore, how does the "geography of *Shugendo*" concern itself with the general geography of religion? As above mentioned, it is difficult just to focus on mountains as setting in terms of other religions, but religious organizations can be treated in common ways to some extent. Further, taking notice of the aspect of ritual, we can identify similar forms of asceticism such as pilgrimage in other parts of the world. Mountain asceticism and pilgrimage have some commonality with respect to the spatial aspect of ritual. The author hopes this article makes a contribution to the geographical study of pilgrimage, in which some significant contributions have already been made (e.g., Bhardwaj and Rinschede 1988).

In addition to the geography of religion in general, the "geography of *Shugendo*" is concerned with the geographical study of mountaineering. For mountain climbing resembles mountain asceticism in that both are non-daily spatial behavior in the mountain. Relation between *Shugendo* and modern mountaineering is also of geographical concern (Oda 1987b).

Notes

1. The best book about *Shugendo* written in English is Earhart (1970). Blacker (1975) threw light on its shamanistic aspects.
2. Some of the description in this chapter depend on general statements by Miyake et al. (1985) and Nagano (1989b).
3. This idea emerged from the studies of Miyake, a *Religionswissenschaftler* of *Shugendo*, who focused on its thought (1985a), ritual (1985b) and organization (1973).
4. Formerly the author (Oda 1989) referred to three viewpoints of sacred mountain areas:

landscape, behavior and recognition. This chapter enlarges this framework and applies it to the whole *Shugendo*.

5. Landscape of the setting is described by e.g., Nagano (1987, 159–214) with the case of Mt. Hiko in the Kyushu district.
6. Iwahana (1983a) has said that mountain religions have a zonal structure and that the mountain villages founded by *yamabushi* are located in the semi-sacred zone.
7. As to the 75-sacred-place view toward the Ohmine Mountains, the author has already made a detailed explanation (Oda 1989).
8. The author made an attempt to extract the structure of the Ohmine Mountains by examining areal differences according to one ascetic practitioner (Oda 1987a).
9. Kishimoto (1975, 184) classified mountain asceticism into two types, mountain pilgrimage and mountain retreat.

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(J): Japanese

(J-E): Japanese with English abstract